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Economic Force and the Russian Problem

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ACCUSTOMED to think in terms of our own political experience, we Americans habitually regard all problems of government as easily solved by the application of American principles. We hailed the Russian revolution as a conquest of democracy, awaiting with almost childish faith the extension of all the blessings of our own system to the great people of Russia. Because the Russian revolution, controlled—just as our own was—by economic and social forces acting and re-acting through local institutions, has followed courses defined by actual conditions of life and not by American idealism, we, of all people, seem the least capable of understanding. Judging the situation by traditional and constitutional standards and forgetting that our own government was produced by the operation of relentless economic forces, we can never understand. Governments cannot exist in theory or imagination. They are not founded upon the idealism of other lands. They spring from the very lives and aspirations of the men and women who compose them. They are brought into being by facts and forces which are not to be resisted by phrase or propaganda.

The fall of the Czar in 1917 was the natural result of unrelenting economic force. European Russia, with a balance of trade in excess of \$200,000,000 in her favor for the year 1912, after two years of war was unable to support her armies or to feed her people. As in France, so in Russia the economic factor was the primary and direct cause of revolution. All classes being united against the Czar, the mass of the Russian people soon made clear to their new leaders the demands which they intended that the revolution should meet: peace, land, industrial reform—primarily economic, every one of them.

In November, 1917, the bolsheviks gained power because these economic demands had in no measure been met, nor even answered. Economic disorganization had progressed. The problem of food supply had become worse, instead of better. In the

Moscow conference of August, 1917, Kerensky's minister of finance stated with all seriousness that the nation had been saved only by the superhuman and self-sacrificing efforts of the workers in the government print-shop. There was no objection to the form or principles of the Provisional Government. The revolution in November, as in March, was economic.

The primary obligation assumed by the bolsheviks was to make peace and to meet these fundamental economic demands. For a time at least their promises of peace and economic relief were accepted, although under their control economic disorganization and destruction have progressed rapidly and with horrible results. Nevertheless, their dominion over not less than 50,000,-000 of people is still maintained, and there is little evidence that their power has diminished. But, as surely as the tide turns, Russia's relief from present suffering will come in the same way as that suffering came upon her—through the relentless operation of economic force acting upon the lives of men and women. Lloyd George, the premier of England, said in the House of Commons:

I do not despair of a solution in time. There are factors in the situation even now which are promising. Reliable information which we have received indicates that whilst the bolsheviki are apparently growing in strength, bolshevism itself is rapidly on the wane. It is breaking down under the relentless pressure of economic facts.

How may we facilitate the operation of these relentless economic forces?

By intervention and embargo the allied governments have isolated European Russia from trade, commerce and communication with the rest of the world. They have cut off the Siberian grain supply from Petrograd and Moscow and have prevented the importation of any of the things which Russia needs from the outside world. This has increased economic oppression, and one might reason that such treatment would hasten the destruction of bolshevik power. It has, however, had an exactly opposite effect. It has aroused whatever revolutionary or national feeling is left in Russian life to support leaders who, whatever else may be said, are sincere in their opposition to foreign domination. It has at the same time relieved these leaders of responsibility for starvation conditions, and has

shifted the burden of this responsibility to the Allies, who are blockading the ports of Russia and cutting off Siberian grain from Petrograd and Moscow. By intensifying starvation conditions, we have placed in the hands of the bolshevik leaders an instrument of the most grim and terrible power, the control of an inadequate food supply, the power of compelling men to serve in order to be fed.

Is it not, indeed, time that we undertook to say whether or not we are charging the bolshevik leaders with things for which we ourselves may be in some measure responsible? Certainly we cannot hope for any successful Allied policy in Russia until we are relieved of all such responsibility before the Russian people. It should therefore be our aim to place the responsibility for the present economic oppression in Russia upon the leaders primarily responsible for it. Bolshevism should be confronted by the economic necessities of life and compelled to assume before the Russian people the obligation of providing an economic system under which the people, as the result of their own labors, will be fed and clothed, and free to engage in the pursuit of their own happiness. Confronted with this responsibility bolshevism will fail, as Lloyd George says, "under the relentless pressure of economic facts." We should raise the blockade if only to place responsibility where it belongs.

But, it is asked, how can we help the Russian people so long as they are ruled by the bolsheviks? The question assumes that we can do nothing. The other night I listened to such an objection addressed by a senator of the United States to representatives of the great coöperative societies of Russia in answer to their earnest plea that the embargo be lifted, so that they, with their own money, might purchase and transport cargoes to Petrograd for the relief of the people of that city, and the regeneration of trade and commerce. The senator was answered without hesitation. These societies have been able to continue their business under bolshevik rule. They are willing to assume the responsibility and the risk of distribution, and, in bringing supplies from America, will make clear to whatever authorities may be in control in Russia that the first ship will be the last ship if distribution is interfered with or prevented. Under such circumstances no government will undertake to interfere.

It was upon this very principle that the American Red Cross dealt with the soviet authorities and obtained their active coöperation in the transport and distribution of Red Cross supplies. During December, 1917, the people of Roumania were facing a severe winter with no adequate supply of winter clothing. This situation if neglected threatened to affect the morale of the Roumanian army. Ukrainia was in civil war and in actual war with the central Russian government. Shipments to Roumania had to pass through the lines between those two contending forces. We organized a shipment of thirty-one cars filled with clothing and supplies for the Roumanian people and obtained the coöperation and protection of the soviet government by insisting that the train should go forward as a demonstration that American Red Cross supplies could be transported in Russia. The entire train proceeded without loss from Petrograd to Yassi in Roumania in no longer time than was required for the ordinary passenger train to make the journey.

When our supplies from America arrived at the northern ports we were told by everybody who showed any interest that to attempt to transport them would undoubtedly result in robbery, and might result in murder. They were food supplies passing through a country which was bereft of such things. We were able to transport without loss from Murmansk to Petrograd three full train-loads of supplies and about half a dozen cars from Archangel. The only protection we had was the protection of the soviet government and the name of the American Red Cross, and we at no time paid one single copeck for freight nor did we pay any bribe to any person anywhere. We took the position that we were in Russia to serve the Russian people: that we were not inclined to pay for that privilege; and that we were entitled to receive the assistance of every one without regard to politics. That position was not only recognized by every person along the line, but we received the most courteous and favorable consideration that could have been received in any land.

These supplies from the northern ports were taken to the city of Petrograd. They were stored in a warehouse in a district far on the outskirts of that city, in a neighborhood which included some of the poorest elements in the city population, made up of people who were enduring serious hardships because they were in

want of the very things that were in that warehouse. That warehouse was protected during several months by no more of a force than would be required to guard any similar warehouse in our cities. And there was nothing stolen.

Through the active aid and coöperation of the local soviets in Petrograd we distributed condensed milk in weekly quantities sufficient to feed 25,000 children. There were no substantial irregularities. The milk was not consumed by bolsheviks; it was distributed to children under the age of three.

On my way out of Russia I was compelled to remain for about three weeks in the northern port of Murmansk. I was there when the first company of British marines were landed. They were landed upon the invitation of the local soviet, acting upon instructions from Petrograd, to coöperate with the Red Guard in protecting the Murman railway against White Guard or German attack. After this company of marines were landed the British admiral fired a salute of seventeen guns to the Russian flag. The only flag in evidence was the red flag of the revolution. From that day until the day I left, the soviet authorities in Murmansk were in daily coöperation with the French and English military and naval authorities. There were 500 Czechoslovak troops awaiting transportation upon the ship upon which I returned to England. They were going to France to fight the Germans. Their progress was facilitated not only by the local soviet, but by the central soviet government. The local soviet authorities were coöperating with the Allies in the protection of supplies at Murmansk and at Kandalaxia.

These and many other instances during the early months of 1918 convinced us that through economic coöperation it was entirely possible to influence and control the use and disposition of Russian products, which otherwise would be used by Germany, and by restoring economic life to increase the power of Russian resistance to German domination.

As the first step in such a program the American ambassador recommended that American railway experts come to Petrograd to serve under the bolshevik authorities in the reorganization and operation of the Russian railways. This recommendation was made after the peace at Brest Litovsk, and when Colonel Robins returned to America he carried with him a plan for economic

coöperation prepared by Lenin for presentation to the American authorities. The economic pressure at that time was so great that it was quite obvious that with American brains, American credit and American goods a tremendous influence could have been brought to bear upon the entire internal situation. With such resources we could have done much to recreate economic life, and, in recreating it, could have controlled and influenced the entire situation.

So long as we use military or economic force against Soviet Russia we confirm the arguments of the bolshevik leaders based upon the theory of the class struggle. Compel these leaders to assume the responsibility of doing business with the rest of the world and the complete failure of their absurd economic theories will be demonstrated before their own people. Russia is an economic vacuum. This vacuum will be filled by America or by Germany. No process of economic reorganization in Russia can even be commenced by the Russian people without the products of our industry. The next crop cannot be harvested without agricultural machinery and binder twine. We are today not only withholding our active assistance, but by the embargo have actually prevented such shipments from America.

Until trade with Russia is restored to its normal courses there can be no restoration of the world's economic equilibrium, and until that equilibrium is restored we shall hear much of bolshevism. When it has been restored we shall be able to forget the whole nasty business as a horrid dream. You cannot deprive humanity of the surplus production of one-seventh of the earth's surface and expect normal conditions of life to be restored upon the signing of a peace treaty—no matter how many weary months or how many tedious words are used in its composition. Lloyd George says he would rather leave Russia bolshevist than see Britain bankrupt, and that remark may be applied to the world at large. What the world needs is to get back on the job, and that quickly. Restore normal trade conditions and theories of government will be compelled to meet the facts of life or get out of the road. The first and most vital step is to open up Soviet Russia.